

# Buried in Mud, Digging for Gold

| Elizabeth Fee and Theodore M. Brown

**CAPTURED IN THIS DRAMATIC** 1986 photograph, some 50 000 workers toil in the Serra Pelada open-top gold mine in the Amazon region of Brazil. The *garimpeiros*, or diggers, scratch through the soil at the bottom of the open pit, fill it into sacks each weighing between 65 and 130 pounds, and then carry the sacks up some 1300 feet of wood and rope ladders to the top of the mine, where it is sifted for gold. Because they work in mud, the gold diggers are called “mud hogs.”<sup>1(19)</sup> The workers are paid an average of 20 cents for digging and carrying each sack of soil—with a bonus if gold is discovered.

As recently as 1994, there were an estimated 400 000 *garimpeiros* working in some 2000 active *garimpos* (artisanal mines) in Brazil, which has been a leading producer of gold and diamonds since the early 18th century.<sup>2</sup> The average annual income of the *garimpeiros* is \$2000. Because of high unemployment rates for unskilled labor, the supply of workers is unending.

The photographer, Sebastião Salgado, was born in Brazil in 1944. He studied economics in São Paulo and Paris and, after earning his PhD in 1968, worked as an economist trying to aid development in the Third World. During a trip to Africa, he

decided that he could convey the harsh lives and human courage of the people more vividly by photographs than through his economic reports. He became a photographer, and has since won more than 50 international awards for his work.

This image was part of a large project to document manual labor throughout the world. Salgado insists that his photographs are to be regarded as journalism, not art. His “militant photography” compellingly, and with a sad tenderness, depicts human and economic injustice while always respecting the innate dignity of the workers.<sup>3</sup> ■

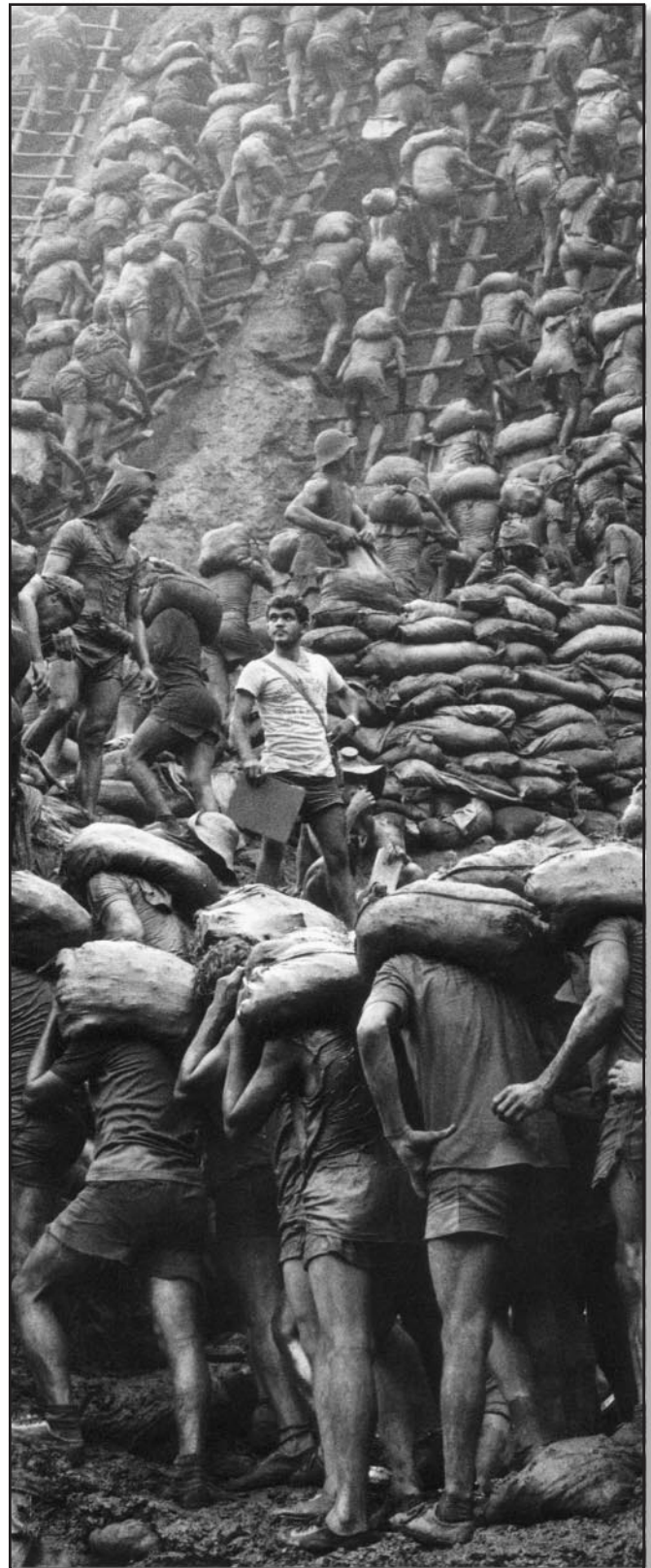
## About the Authors

Elizabeth Fee is with the History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Md. Theodore M. Brown is with the Departments of History and of Community and Preventive Medicine at the University of Rochester, Rochester, NY.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Elizabeth Fee, PhD, Building 38, Room 1E21, 8600 Rockville Pike, Bethesda, MD 20894 (e-mail: elizabeth\_fee@nlm.nih.gov).

## References

1. Salgado S. *Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age*. New York, NY: Aperture Foundation; 1993.
2. Machado IF, Figueirôa SF de M. 500 years of mining in Brazil: a brief review. *Resources Policy*. 2001;27:9–24.
3. Salgado S. *An Uncertain Grace: Photographs by Sebastião Salgado. Essays by Eduardo Galeano and Fred Ritchin*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1990.



Source. Courtesy of the International Center of Photography, New York, NY.